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Wondering about Dialogic Theory and Practice

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Abstract
This commentary engages with essentially contestable questions raised by the School of the Dialogue of Cultures. It focuses on questions about how theory should relate to practice and how a "dialogic" approach can involve students in simultaneously rigorous and relevant academic discussions.

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Comments
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My recent encounter with the "School of the Dialogue of Cultures," through English translations published in the *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, has provided three "points of wonder," or productive, essentially contestable questions: how should "theory" relate to "practice?" what is so important about "dialogue?" and how can we create a pedagogy that engages students deeply with the fruits of our intellectual traditions, while avoiding monologism and leaving open the possibility of students moving beyond those traditions? I have enjoyed being provoked by these questions, and I appreciate the opportunity to reflect on them here.

Theory and Practice

The School of the Dialogue of Cultures (hereafter "SDC") has involved an unusual and productive association between academic philosophers and psychologists, who develop theory and do research, and educational practitioners who teach children. In the West, in recent decades, academic institutions have increasingly tried to overcome their image as isolated "ivory towers" and connect theory and research to practice and practitioners. The SDC might provide a model for how to traverse the "gap" between theory and practice that more and more of us want to cross.

Berlyand (2009a) describes how, according to SDC, education provides a crucial test for philosophy. Philosophy is about the origins or foundations of knowledge and other basic human capacities. Education is the central means through which individual human beings come to develop these capacities and participate fully in uniquely human practices. So a philosopher can usefully explore the worth of his or her ideas by investigating how one might educate young people to have the capacities that the

philosopher envisions. Like John Dewey (1916), in pursuing this link between philosophy and education Bibler (2009) and other SDC scholars go beyond reflection on the philosophy of education. They also help create and implement pedagogical practices designed according to their theories. Their link between theory and practice is thus both theoretical and practical.

In order to see more clearly how SDC can provide a model for how we might traverse the gap between theory and practice, we must make a crucial distinction between two senses of the word "practice." On a sociocentric account of knowledge, humans accomplish things by participating together with other people, objects and tools in larger systems that make successful action possible. From this perspective, knowledge is embedded in practice. The social tools that people use to accomplish cognitive work, and the systems of resources that together make successful cognition possible, come from practices that sociohistorically located groups of people engage in. But we must clearly distinguish between two senses of "practice" here. First, an emphasis on "practice" is part of the sociocentric turn away from decontextualized, individual-centered conceptions of knowledge, part of the focus on how knowledge is embedded within human practices and not separate from them. Second, "practice" refers to a set of habitual activities in which people try to change individual and social realities instead of just making sense of them. These two senses of practice do not necessarily go together. One could use a practice-based sense of knowledge to explore academic conceptualization that is far removed from practice in the second sense, as sociologists of science like Knorr-Cetina (1999) have done. One could also use a decontextualized, non-practice-based sense of knowledge to explore how academic knowledge gets translated into practice in the

second sense. This is how we commonly think of the gap between theory and practice—wondering how decontextualized knowledge can be deductively applied to practical challenges.

From a sociocentric perspective, however, knowledge is not decontextualized, but always embedded in practices. If knowledge is embedded in practice (sense 1, hereafter practice$_1$), there is no in-kind gap to be crossed when we apply knowledge to practice (sense 2, hereafter practice$_2$). This does not make the theory-practice gap disappear, however. There is work to be done in moving representations and habitual actions across types of activities. The gap between theory and practice$_2$ involves the use of ideas and tools that have been developed in more decontextualized activities to accomplish more direct changes in individual and social realities. Both sides of this "gap" involve practices$_1$, but practices$_1$ of different kinds. In the domain of education, for instance, theories involve representations of teaching and learning and characteristic practices$_1$ involve representing these ideas and collecting and analyzing data. These practices$_1$ typically occur in academic settings, research centers and educational bureacracies. Practices$_1$ in practice$_2$ involve teachers and students engaging with each other in order to improve the students' facility with various ideas and skills. In their activities and rhythms, these two types of practices$_1$ are quite distinct. But ideas and tools from each can be of use to the other, if they can be moved from one type of setting to the other. The theory/practice$_2$ gap can thus be overcome through the movement of ideas, tools and practices$_1$ across domains of activity.

This is what the SDC academics and practitioners have accomplished. Inspired by Bibler, he and other academics have generated a set of ideas about dialogue, history

and human nature in its contemporary form. They have also modified typical academic practices$_1$ of questioning, conversation and argument, such that these practices$_1$ are particularly appropriate for people at this sociohistorical moment. Then they have worked with educational practitioners$_2$ to use these ideas and practices$_1$ in educating children. The results, judging from the remarkably deep and reflective classroom conversations reported in Beryland (2009b), Kurganov (2009), Osetinsky (2009) and Solomadin and Kurganov (2009), are remarkable. It is also clear that the movement of ideas and practices$_1$ has not been one-directional. SDC academics have provided useful resources that allow practitioners$_2$ to teach more effectively, but working with practitioners$_2$ has also given academics new ideas and practices$_1$ that have enriched their work.

I know of two Western movements that have facilitated similar traversals between theory and practice$_2$. I will discuss one of these, "interpretive discussion," in the third section below. The other is the "practitioner inquiry movement," in which educators do disciplined inquiry into their own practice$_2$ (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009). As opposed to the traditional model of educational theory and practice$_2$, in which educational researchers develop knowledge that practitioners$_2$ merely implement, practitioner inquiry empowers educators to gather data themselves and draw conclusions in ways that can improve their own practice$_2$. Duckworth (1986) argues that the distinction between theory and practice$_2$often misleads us into thinking that educators do not gather data to answer empirical questions. She describes how good teaching always involves formulating hypotheses and gathering information to assess those hypotheses. The goal may not be to discover general principles about the world—focusing instead on solving

specific problems of practice$_2$—but the inquiry is nonetheless empirical and systematic, having a similar form to research done by academics.

The organized practitioner inquiry movement has built on the fact that practitioners already do inquiry that resembles educational research, helping educators to make their inquiry even more systematic. This often takes place in practitioner inquiry groups that provide peer review and support. Many such groups initially include a university-based educational researcher as a consultant. Practitioners learn techniques of data collection and analysis from the researcher, who then steps aside and lets the practitioners use these techniques for practice$_2$-based inquiry. After a while the researcher is rarely needed, because the practitioner community can communicate relevant ideas and techniques to new members.

The practitioner inquiry movement illustrates traversals across the theory/practice$_2$ gap. The practices$_1$ that comprise educational practice$_2$ are in fact heterogeneous. Even before they get involved in the formal practitioner inquiry movement, educators engage in many activities that we think of more as "theory" or "research," like developing conceptual models of experience, formulating hypotheses, gathering and analyzing data. The practitioner inquiry movement expands practitioners' repertoire of models and tools, allowing them to do more systematic inquiry. It does so by borrowing ideas and methods from more formal educational research. Practitioners do not "apply" fully-formed empirical generalizations or theoretical propositions that have been formulated and tested by researchers. Instead, they borrow specific analytic techniques and recontextualize them. The practitioner inquiry movement is clearly different from the pedagogical innovations created by SDC, but both involve productive

traversals as ideas and practices$_1$ move back and forth between the domains of theory and practice$_2$.

Dialogue

Dialogic Pedagogy

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